

Investigation of a long performance

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1. The context of ASLSP?

This essay explores John Cage's composition *As Slow As Possible* and its mental and physical effects on the performer during a 25-hour performance, providing new perspectives on experimental music. According to John Cage trust, (2016) *ASLSP*, commissioned by the Friends of the Maryland Summer Institute in 1985, was chosen for the University of Maryland International Piano Festival and Competition. The composition, titled "*As Slow(lee) and Soft(ly) as Possible*" and referencing James Joyce's *Finnegans Wake*, consists of eight pieces, with one omitted and one repeated. Released in 1987 as *ORGAN2/ASLSP*, the score includes a title page, instructions, and four leaves with music, each containing two pieces. The main idea was to encourage people to slow down. (Peters Edition EP 67185)

1.1 What is experimental music?

Experimental music defies simple categorization, representing a departure from traditional musical sensibilities and challenging the very boundaries of what music can be. Heavily influenced by figures like John Cage, it often explores new sounds, instruments, and forms, questioning the conventional roles of composer, performer, and audience. This genre frequently incorporates chance, improvisation, and unconventional notations, resulting in a nebulous relationship between the score and the final sound. Experimental music embraces the unconventional, valuing the underlying concept or idea as much as the sonic outcome. (Fox, 2009 p 7- 26)

Gottschalk, (2016) explores experimental music as a position of openness, inquiry, uncertainty, and discovery, rather than a defined genre. It involves exploring facts, circumstances, and materials for potential sonic outcomes through diverse activities like composition, performance, and listening. This methodological approach emphasizes inquiry over stylistic conventions and challenges the notion of music as self-expression. Experimental work's true value lies in its capacity to transform the listener's perception and experience. Nyman, (1999 p. 2) defines experimental music by adhering to traditional musical elements and questioning what else could music be. It is seen as a process of interpretation, engaging with sound that does not require conventional rhythms, melodies, or instruments.

1.2 Who is John Cage?

John Cage, a renowned composer, was influenced by his family and artistic journey. He dropped out of college to study in Europe, exposing himself to modern art, architecture, and literature. Cage studied composition with Varèse, and Tenney, transforming the piano into percussion. Nyman's book, (1999) delves into Cage's piano work. *As Slow as Possible (ASLSP)* exemplifies experimental music's engagement with time by drastically slowing tempo, foregrounding the experience itself. This extreme duration challenges traditional musical progress, transforming time into an active compositional element. Silence, integral to the piece, becomes a space where subtle sonic shifts gain significance, aligning with experimental music's interest in indeterminacy. ASLSP invites listeners to perceive sound and silence as a continuum, blurring boundaries and emphasizing the passage of time as a fundamental aspect of musical experience.

1.3 The original performance

The "Organ2/ASLSP" piece by John Cage was first performed by Gerd Zacher in 2001, and since then, numerous musicians have attempted to play it in various lengths. The performance that comes closest to John Cage's ideals is in Halberstadt. The performance began on September 5, 2001, on the 89th birthday of John Cage. An organ with the first modern keyboard arrangement was built in 1361 in Halberstadt's cathedral. The piece's duration is 639 years, with the organ being the first of its kind with a keyboard of 12 notes, which is used on keyboard instruments today. In the fast-paced age, this piece of music aims to slow down our emotional lives and symbolizes confidence in the future. The length of the performance symbolizes not only the perception of music but also the perception of time, supposed standstill, and transitoriness. As a generational project, this piece resists fast reception, the simple solution preferred in society. (Universes ,1997 John Cage Organ Project Halberstadt)

2. Performance Preparation and Its Impact

The preparation for a performance of ASLSP special requires meticulous planning, considering all outcomes and potential issues. It involves determining resources and duration. To play the piece of 8 movements in 25 hours, a precise piano score was found by Tomás Brantmayer y Sebastián Jatz Rawicz.

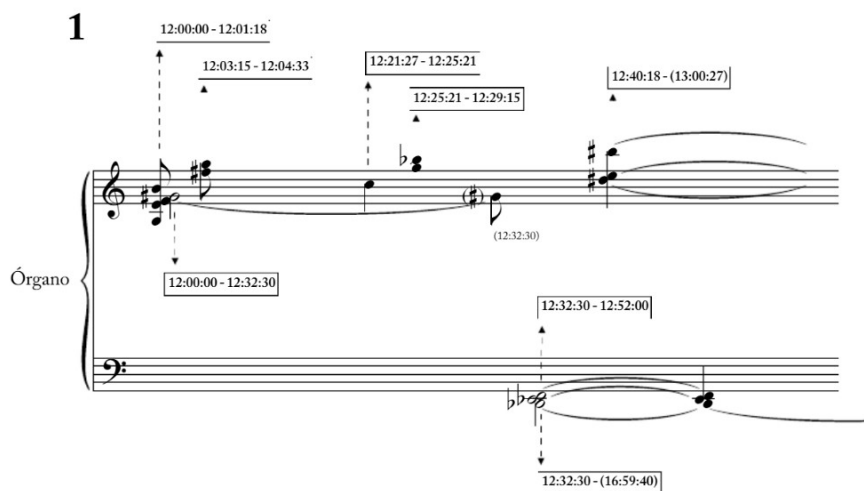
At: (<https://www.scribd.com/document/378619951/Aslsp-John-Cage>, 2025).

Then I had to find a way to prolong a sound that goes to infinity.

2.1 How did I prepare, both mentally and physically?

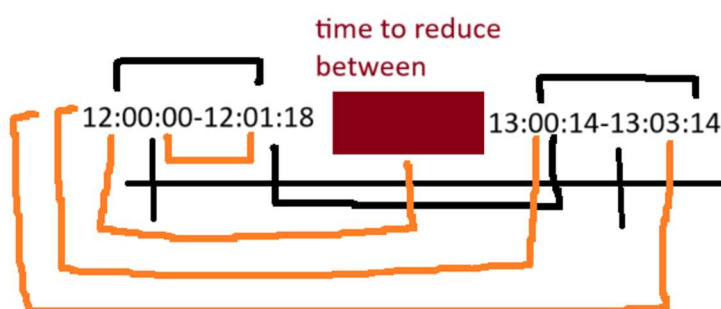
After I had found the score, I needed to adjust the time to 25 hours instead of 30. Not being great at math. I asked a mathematician friend for help. We needed a formula to reduce all 488-time segments while maintaining their proportions fairly. At first, we

thought we just had to shrink the intervals between notes, but we overlooked that the entire timeline, the timing between the notes, also needed reduction. It took us two weeks to realize this mistake.



(Eg1)

(Eg2)



For example, a B note from 12:00:00 to 12:01:18 is followed by an A from 12:03:15 to 12:04:33. Initially, we tried reducing only the note durations, forgetting that the gaps

also had to shrink proportionally. Two weeks later, we realized the need for a reference point to apply reductions evenly, as notes often overlapped. We scaled everything relative to the first-time marker, ensuring proportionality. However, we discovered that the piece lasted five days, requiring a 75.66% reduction in duration. We had 488 calculations to process with the correct formula. To automate this, we asked a

programmer to create a tool, which was challenging to debug but successfully implemented. (see Eg 3)

```
1 import json
2 from datetime import datetime, timedelta
3
4 def main():
5     PICE_DURATION = 369814
6     TO_GET = 90000
7     TO_REMOVE = PICE_DURATION - TO_GET
8
9
10    percentage_to_remove = (100 * TO_REMOVE) / PICE_DURATION
11    # percentage_to_remove = 0
12    print("We need to remove:", percentage_to_remove, "%")
13
14    data = json.load(open('input.json', 'r', encoding="utf8"))
15    input_data = []
16
17    start_time = datetime(2024,1,1, hour=10)
18    for d in data:
19        e = d.split(' - ')
20
21        day = int(e[0])
22        date = e[1]
23        day2 = int(e[2])
24        date2 = e[3]
25
26        date splitted = list(map(int, date.split(":")))
27        date2 splitted = list(map(int, date2.split(":")))
28
29        date_object = datetime(2024,1,1, hour=date splitted[0], minute=date splitted[1], second=date splitted[2])
30        date2_object = datetime(2024,1,1, hour=date2 splitted[0], minute=date2 splitted[1], second=date2 splitted[2])
31
32        date_object -= timedelta(hours=2)
33        date2_object -= timedelta(hours=2)
34
35        date_object += timedelta(days=day)
36        date2_object += timedelta(days=day2)
```

(a section of the
script)

(Eg 3)

Over the past four months, I have discovered that previous performance (list of previous performance https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/As_Slow_as_Possible) only played the first movement, and the score used a different time format, counting days instead of hours. However, they managed to transform the formula to this new format, ensuring that their previous work was not in vain.

[illegible]

(Eq4): sequence graph for ASLSP performance

The third most important thing was to create a score that updated automatically based on what measure I was playing. Eq5/Eq6 is a section of the script I made in python.



(Eg5)

```
import time
import os
import pyfiglet
import sys
from colorama import Fore, Style, init

# Initialize colorama
init(autoreset=True)

# Prevent system sleep (cross-platform)
class PreventSleep:
    def __enter__(self):
        if os.name == "nt":
            os.system("powercfg -change -standby-timeout-ac 0")
        elif os.name == "posix":
            os.system("caffeinate -dims &")
        return self

    def __exit__(self, exc_type, exc_value, traceback):
        if os.name == "nt":
            os.system("powercfg -change -standby-timeout-ac 30")
        elif os.name == "posix":
            os.system("killall caffeinate")

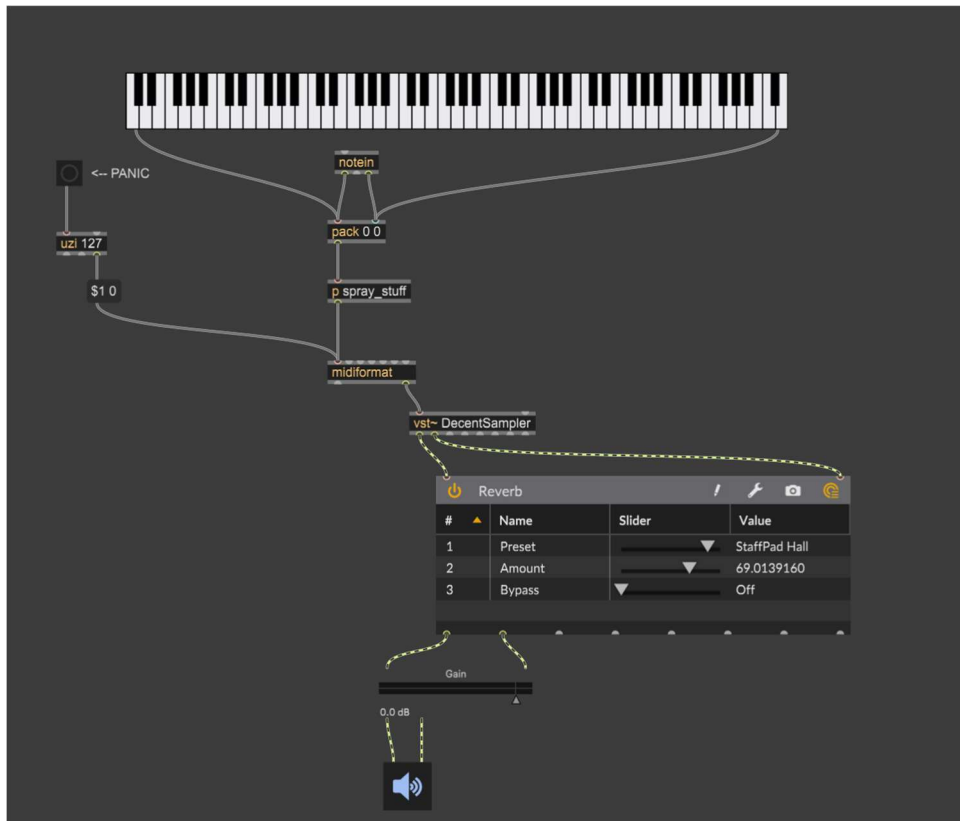
# Define the schedule of notes with actions and timings (durations in minutes)
schedule = [
    {"action": "1 begin", "notes": "none", "duration": 30.0},
    {"action": "2 Sound", "notes": "G#4, B4, G#5", "duration": 30.0},
    {"action": "3 Sound", "notes": "E3, E4", "duration": 29.9},
    {"action": "4 Release", "notes": "G#4, B4", "duration": 21.1},
    {"action": "5 Sound", "notes": "A4, C5, F#5", "duration": 10.7},
]
```

(Eg6)

Now I had to think about the sound, I want to warn you, do not think of remaining for 25 hours sitting pressing the keys, it is crazy, and you will regret it during the execution.

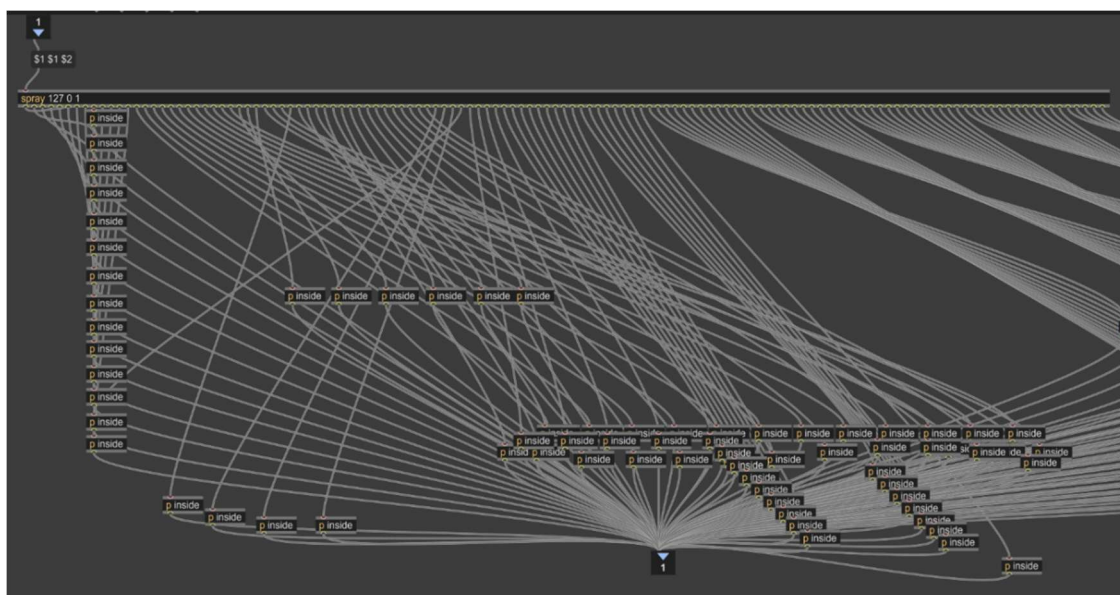
Initially it was my plan but after trying to play for 3 hours the performance I realized that it was not an option at least for me, to find a solution I asked my technology lecturer for advice, and after talking I found that the most stable solution was to use max 9 (see Eg7/8/9)

The patch that I created after various revisions.



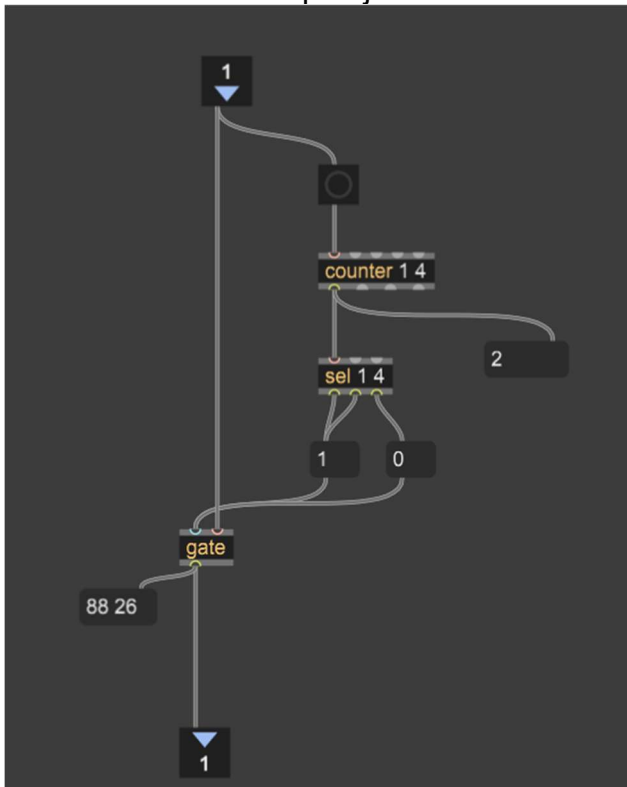
(Eg7)

this is inside the spray stuff.



(Eg8)

and inside of the p object there is this.



(Eg9)

Returning to my earlier remarks regarding the sound, a few days prior to the performances. I realised that the sound I chose ended after 5 minutes. It may appear easy, but quite often an organ Virtual Studio Technology records extraordinarily long notes/sounds and after 5 minutes, this sent me into a bit of a panic, I tried to create loops for the sound but I couldn't and the only solution I found in a short time was to use an accordion sound that I adjusted to try to make it sound like an organ. The last things that I made it is a wooden mark (see Eg10) for the keys so that I did not need to remember what key a pressed, all this work is optional but, in my advice, do



everything that makes you comfortable, I did not trust myself in remembering the notes for such a long time. here and example:

(Eg10)

Now the last things to prepare, I meditated, aiming for four hours, but I underestimated its difficulty. I adjusted my sleep schedule and brought plenty of food to stay energized and prevent drowsiness during the performance.

2.2 What were my experiences during the performance?

I would like to start with a quote from T J Bacon:

The emotive, immediate response later became a clinical, reflective recollection. p. 20

During the performance, I was very tense at the beginning. After a few minutes there were some problems with the live software, but after starting the first 30 minutes it helped me calm down. The silence that surrounded the room was like it penetrated me; I was excited about what we were doing. One thing that struck me was how time did not go linearly. The tempo was timeless, no movement between them but states of being, feeling the harmonics and vibrations that merged together creating a melody, I felt immersed in a vast space I have never felt the harmonics in such a mystical way, being in the cage, makes you feel really trapped, at first it scares you, you do not know what could happen. Something could go wrong, and it is an unknown as how whether or not one could overcome any adversity, it scares you, these were the first thoughts. When the first three notes arrived, I felt as if I had witnessed the birth of something more immense than us, I could venture to say like the big bang, in a moment of silence, emptiness, nothingness and omnipresent, and then there it is and you do not know how considering that in a void the sound cannot expand and yet there it is, in its magnificence. Initially, there were only three notes, but after five hours it began to be a wall a wall immense wall of sound, then time passed and more the dissonant sound became present almost like an entity that observed us, at a certain point the sound was so dissonant that my mind turned off almost as if I were catatonic, moving and continuing automatically. After 8 hours I began to see the piece, seeing the outside change and coordinated with the sound gave me an incredible sense of satisfaction. after a night spent listening to dissonant chords an ethereal moment happened, seeing the sun rise, after being locked in a room, all night, even though with the light the room seemed much darker, a chord that had been prepared so meticulously, for over 14 hours arrived (G flat major #11)(youtube video part 3: [4:55:21](#)). It made us feel as if the earth had just been born, it was incredible, after listening to it, the energies came

back to us as if by magic, we went out and when the fresh air that had such purity that left us marvelling at nature. created by man.

2.3 How did I feel afterward, both mentally and physically

Before talking about the aftermath, when the last sound stopped playing and silence came, in that moment I realized how silent the “cage” could be. In that room there was a realm of silence, leaving aside, after the performance I felt nostalgia; despite having ended so recently and it had only lasted for 25 hours. I perceived that I only just begun to appreciate what had been, I had a sense of fear of forgetting what I felt in that instant, it made me reevaluate how short the time of 25 hours, could be. A timespan that had initially felt so long yet, upon reaching the end of the 25 hours, I realized why, in the beginning the change were, much more often around 30 minutes each and because of this the time felt faster, but in the ending the opposite happened, each change was more stable, and listening to the same sound for longer made me lose the time. Even now I wanted to leave some time to metabolize what had been. Bacon (2024) stated how when reflecting on the performance two years later, his recollections became more clinical and distanced: Obviously with different forms after 12 days it is true, even listening to some pieces of the performance I do not feel more excited in my mind, I probably assume that you really need to listen to everything to appreciate a work. Some feedback I had from Chris an assistant who was with me for 25 hours, was that proved that this piece is partly and more for the people who are actively part of it, because I feel that listening to it is just a small aspect, Cage's idea of slowing down was emphasized in the piece, which was actively performed by me and Chris. I believe that we should learn to slow down in any place or moment of our life, influenced by my background in Italy and London. Despite forgetting about this hidden meaning in life, the piece personally rekindled my memory. Researching on sleep deprivation revealed similarities in the studies conducted. (Pilcher and Huffcutt's 1996) They calculated an overall effect size of approximately 0.62, which falls in the moderate-to-large range. This indicates that sleep deprivation has a robust and statistically significant negative effect on performance. Confirming my own experience, and it is especially visible in the videos in the last five hours. One major effect it was my ability in speaking, explaining myself become, much harder, even speaking my native language, Italian, was difficult, the effect, my body was very cold, and I was very pale. The negative effects were more pronounced on tasks requiring higher-order cognitive

functions (such as decision-making, problem solving, and complex memory tasks) than on simpler tasks (such as basic reaction time or vigilance).

In a 1982 interview Cage commented that he wanted to make his "music so that it doesn't force the performers of it into a particular groove, but ... gives them some space in which they can breathe and do their own work with a degree of originality. I like to make suggestions, and then see what happens, rather than setting down laws and forcing people to follow them." (Thorman, 2006 p. 111)

3. How do I evaluate the outcome?

The outcome of this performance was a demanding mental and physical challenge as well as a deep creative investigation. This experience taught me that ASLSP is more than just classical music, altering people's perceptions of time and raising their level of auditory engagement. It reinforced Cage's idea of slowing down by creating an immersive, almost meditative state through the interplay of extreme duration, silence, and harmonic progression. My mind was greatly affected by the prolonged activity without sleep. The project effectively illustrated the difficulties of executing Cage's compositions while also providing fresh perspectives on the effects of experimental music on perception, thought processes, and the limits of human endurance.

3.1 Comparison with other pieces?

ASLSP, Vexations, and Longplayer are 3 pieces with time as the key in each of these pieces. Satie's Vexations (1893) is an early example of endurance-based music, consisting of a short phrase repeated 840 times. Jem Finer's Longplayer explores time in music, conceived as a 1000-year-long composition. Started in January 2000, it is designed to play continuously until January 3000. This contrasts with pieces relying on human endurance, as Longplayer uses algorithmic generation to create its ever-evolving soundscape. This piece more than others push the barrier like ASLSP. (Off limits: 40 Artangel projects, 2002)

3.2 What can I learn from observing similar performances?

Studying similar performances offers insights into endurance strategies, audience engagement, and perceived impact. Vexations and Longplayer demonstrate how

repetition affects both performers and listeners, while ASLSP interpretations like Halberstadt inspire different pacing approaches and sound design choices. Studying these performances helps refine preparation, explore new interpretative possibilities, and deepen understanding of musical time.

3.3 What I would have done different?

I have some concerns in my preparation for the performance. I would have trained myself better in staying awake as long as possible, starting in the morning helps much more, use a very powerful computer is necessary, if you want to record video and audio, make backups is essential, the software can have malfunctions. I took 3 backups because I did not stop the recordings every 3 hours, but I let them continue until the end and the software was not able to save them. This is all.

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Appendix

YouTube video:

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=P9GBv66Khw0&t=19386s&ab_channel=francescopiccio (accessed on 11 April 2025)